

# Talking With Kids:

## 10 Tips About TV News



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## **Why is it important to talk with your kids about what they see on the news?**

As adults, we depend on "The News" as our primary source for information about the world we live in. Whether it's the local newspaper, nightly TV newscasts, cable news networks, news radio, or Web sites, graphic footage and accounts of the latest happenings in the world are being delivered right into our homes 24 hours a day. This constant barrage can be overwhelming for adults, but it can be especially confusing and frightening for young children.

Many adults do not realize how many kids actually watch TV news or read the newspaper. In addition, consider the opportunities kids have to be exposed to the news. Maybe you listen to news radio in the morning while you drive the kids to school. Perhaps you read the newspaper at the breakfast table. Remember, while you're reading an article on page seven, your kids may be staring at the front-page headlines. You might watch the evening news while helping your kids with their homework. Or they may be exposed to a "newsflash" during their favorite sit-com. Even if you avoid exposing your kids to the news, they still get the latest news accounts from their peers.

It's no wonder the news can be enticing to children. The average news broadcast contains as much violence, sex and action as many of the most popular entertainment shows on TV. But unlike those shows, the news is real. News programs can show or say things that might be too graphic or intense for entertainment programs. During the recent White House scandal, for example, the phrase "oral sex" was commonplace throughout the news media.

As a parent, only you can decide what news is appropriate for your children. Used properly, the news can teach children many positive things about the world. Knowledge and understanding of news events can teach kids a sense of belonging and social responsibility. Most elementary school teachers require kids to follow certain news stories for weekly current events lessons. Additionally, many literacy programs encourage parents and kids to read the newspaper together to develop language skills and healthy reading habits.

At the same time, the daily news can perpetuate stereotypes, confuse, anger and even frighten children. By talking with our kids early and often about the stories and images they are exposed to by the news and other media, we can help them better understand the world around them. This communication can be especially

valuable when kids are exposed to tough issues like violence, sex, drugs and alcohol, death and divorce.

## **How do we talk with our kids about the news?**

The first step is understanding how the news works. It is important to keep these things in mind when talking with your kids about what they see on the news:

- News reports focus on the unusual. While this might seem obvious to adults, it can be difficult for children to understand. Seldom will you see a news story focused on the thousands of airplanes that take off and land safely on any given day. However, it becomes headline news when out of all those many safe flights, one is involved in a plane crash. Often news coverage of particular issues is disproportionate to their occurrences in real life. For example, news coverage of crime has increased in recent years, even though the total crime rate has decreased significantly.
- The news often reports only the simple facts of a story: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? These are the six questions journalists try to answer in even the briefest news report. This leaves very little time to add background, context, or explanation to complex news. In fact a typical broadcast news story is only 30 seconds long. Even though newspapers can provide more contextual information than TV news, the average print report is only 400 words. The result is that our kids only hear who's killing whom with little or no explanation of why those countries are at war.

To help you get started, the following ten tips will help you in talking to your kids about the news:

## **Ten Tips For Talking With Kids About the News**

### **1. Explore the age appropriateness of news you allow your children to see.**

Whether and how kids should consume the news really depends on the child and how that news is presented. As parents, we all sense that kids today are growing up too fast. The simple truth is that they have access to much more information than previous generations. To help you decide what's right for your child, be aware of some possible effects of their exposure to news based on their age. Keep in mind, however, that these generalizations may not be true for all children.

Preschool age (under age six) kids have a limited ability to discern the fantasy of an entertainment show from the reality of news. In most cases they don't really see a difference between a car wreck on TV news and a car wreck in the movies. At the same time, kids in this age range are as likely to be afraid of what they see on the news as they are of dragons, or other fictional worries. Most experts do warn, however, that prolonged exposure to news and other media can lead to the "desensitization" of kids. That is, commonplace crime and violence seen in the news and other media can work to reduce the emotional response of even the most shocking images among viewers. Parents should use caution when allowing preschool children to be exposed to all types of media. It may be wise to allow your preschooler to watch the news only when you can be present to supervise.

Psychologically, kids between the ages of six and ten are most vulnerable to what they see on the news. They know the difference between fantasy and reality, but they lack perspective. Instead of worrying about monsters under the bed, they tend to worry about real dangers like kidnapping, car wrecks and tornadoes. During this time, it is most important to watch the news and other media with your child. If you find these things especially disturb him, consider turning the news off.

Remember that children will not understand the frequency with which events occur. If they hear about break-ins, injury, and murder in their area (even if the area is a large one that contains millions of people), the fact that the event was important enough to be covered will lead them to believe that these are very common events. Help children develop a realistic sense of danger and limit their exposure to gruesome reviews of crime and injury.

Adolescents (age 11 and up) have grown to be much more media savvy. They have a better understanding of fact and fiction and are expanding their own perspective on a daily basis. But their constant exposure to media and peers can lead to conflicting information and confusion. As the parent of an adolescent, you can't be there to monitor everything to which your child is exposed, but it is extremely important to check in with her about the media and other issues she is beginning to experience.

## **2. Watch or read the news with your kids.**

A great way to alleviate the fear and confusion of the news is to share the experience with your child. By reading the newspaper together in the morning or watching a nightly news broadcast with your child, you will be able to know exactly what they are being exposed to and can talk with them about it. If you see

something that may be upsetting to your child, don't be afraid to strike up a conversation on the subject. For younger children, you may also consider setting rules against watching the news when you aren't around.

### **3. Create an open dialogue**

The best way to make sure kids know they are safe, is to talk with them about what they see and hear. If your child is worried about the country going to war, talk with him about the chances of that happening and what it would mean for his safety. Additionally, let your children know not to be ashamed or afraid to talk with you whenever they see something they don't understand.

Use the news as an opportunity to discuss tough issues with your kids. We know it is important to talk with our kids about tough issues, but there isn't always enough time in the day to sit down for a long talk. Also, kids tend to resist formal discussions, often thinking they are in for another lecture from mom or dad. But if we use "talk opportunities," moments that arise in everyday life, our kids are less likely to tune us out. For instance, a newspaper item about a child expelled from school for carrying a gun to class can help you start a discussion on guns and violence.

### **4. Share your feelings about the news you see.**

As a parent, you have the opportunity to be the first person to instill in your child your sense of values and moral principles. The "just-the-facts" explanations of a news report may leave a child confused about right and wrong. Remember, research shows that children want and need moral guidance from their parents. Try starting off a conversation with something like "That news report about gun violence bothers me, because I don't believe guns should be kept where kids can reach them."

### **5. Let your kids know the difference between news and reality.**

Is the news real? If you mean did the reported story actually happen somewhere in the world, yes the news is completely real. But the news media can lead people to believe that the stories reported are closer to home, or that they happen more often than they do in real life. Violence in schools is an example of a prevalent story in the news. So prominent, in fact, that adults and kids alike are afraid that violence is sure to happen in their schools. The reality, however, reveals that there is less than a one in two million chance that a child will be injured during a violent

outbreak at school. Make sure your kids know that just because they saw it on the news, it doesn't mean it is likely to happen to them.

#### **6. Acknowledge your child's fears.**

Even though many of the stories reported in the news may not really happen to you or your child, the fear these stories can bring out is very real. That's why it is important to reassure a child that there are people working to make sure her personal world will remain safe. Try saying something like this to your six to ten-year-old: "I know you feel a little scared by what you saw on the news, but you'll be fine. I am here to protect and take care of you." An older child might be comforted by a few additional details: "Dad and I aren't the only ones watching over you. Adults in the community -- like neighbors, the police and teachers -- are all looking out for your safety."

#### **7. Explore the facts with your child.**

At times it may be necessary to provide your child with more factual information than is provided in a news report. For example, a news report on the increasing number of people with HIV/AIDS may mean additional facts are needed to properly explain the disease to your child. Research the facts with your child about how the disease is transmitted and what can be done to prevent it. Make sure you look at safety and prevention measures when researching topics.

#### **8. Acknowledge the complexity of the news.**

Even the most informed parent is sure to have difficulties explaining why people fight wars, or why politicians don't always tell the truth. Even when we can explain them, our children might not understand. It's important that as parents we let our kids know that the news and the world are very complex, and that greater perspective will come with age and continued communication.

#### **9. Select kid-friendly news sources for your child.**

All news is not created equal. Take care to select good news sources for your kids. Generally speaking, TV news, especially local news shows, tend to focus on issues like crime and violence. Newspapers are often seen as a better source to get more in-depth news coverage with background and context. Network news usually focuses less on crime and violence than local news. However, there are local news stations committed to presenting "family friendly" newscasts with more responsible reporting. Look for these stations in your area. Also keep in mind that

there are news sources created just for kids. Nick News on the children's network Nickelodeon is an example of a program designed to report on issues that kids care about in a way they can understand. There are also many Web sites and magazines dedicated to news for kids. For adolescents, consider subscribing to magazines that focus on news and issues important to your child.

#### **10. Balance your child's news diet.**

Few parents would allow a child to fill up on an all-chocolate food diet. Thinking about your child's exposure to the news in the same terms can be helpful. It's important to make sure kids have a balanced news diet. The best way to achieve this is to know your child's news environment, that is when, where and what kind of news to which your child is exposed. Is your daughter listening to news radio while you drive her to school in the morning, or is she watching crime scene footage on TV news shows that follow her favorite afternoon cartoon?

Whatever the case, balance your child's news diet by setting clear limits. Make it known to your son that he can only watch the news when you are in the room to watch with him, or limit him to only news sources that are less violence-oriented, like network newscasts. Experience the news with your child, and balance his news diet by talking with him about what he sees.

The same way a nutritious diet, rich with plenty of fruits and vegetables, helps promote healthy growth for kids' bodies, a balanced news diet, rich in communication and the perspective parents provide, promotes growth for their minds.

Now that you are a news expert, here are some specific tips for talking with your kids about common news topics.

### **Some Common & Troubling News Topics**

#### **Crime and Violence**

Stories of crime and violence dominate news coverage. Whether it is outbreaks of schoolyard violence, stories of war from across the world or grizzly crime scene footage, this type of news can be frightening to kids and leave them questioning their own safety. The best way to let kids know they will be OK is to encourage discussion. Make sure your kids understand that just because they see a news report about crime or violence, it doesn't mean they are likely to become victims.

News stories of crime and violence are an excellent opportunity to initiate a conversation on the real life consequences of guns and violence. Unlike in the movies, victims from real life violence don't get up after the cameras stop rolling. Don't hesitate to share your feelings on the subject. Remember your kids are looking to you to help them figure out the difference between right and wrong. Try looking up additional facts about a violence story to help explain consequences to your child.

Stories of kids as victims can be the most disturbing for children. Kidnappings and school shootings reported on the news leave kids feeling especially vulnerable. That is why it is so important to monitor the news to which your kids are exposed. If you see your child is visibly upset, try talking with him. Reassure him of all the people working to make sure he is safe. Let him know what he can do to be safe and to prevent becoming a victim. If your child still seems unduly upset or withdrawn, consider limiting his exposure to the news. Turn off the news, or try finding another news source. Remember, network news and newspapers focus much less on crime and violence than local TV news.

## **Sex**

From political scandal to Viagra, the topic of sex is all over the news. If the nightly news discussions of oval office sex and stained blue dresses left you wanting to cover your child's ears, you weren't alone. The truth is the news can tell stories in much more graphic detail than other media. But don't miss out on the opportunity to talk with your child about sex. Remember, kids who feel they can talk with their parents about sex—because their moms and dads speak openly and listen carefully to them—are less likely to engage in risky behavior as teens than kids who feel they can't talk about sex with their parents. An uncomfortable news moment could lead to a great discussion about puberty, peer pressure or even love. Make sure you share your values about sex with your child.

We know that talking with kids about sex can be very uncomfortable, but the more you examine the subject, the more confident you'll feel discussing it.

## **Drugs**

The issue of drugs can be very confusing to children. This confusion can be exaggerated by news reports of drug usage increasing among younger kids, or of a young girl being expelled for bringing Midol to school. It is up to you as a parent to use these opportunities to explain the difference between legal and illegal drugs to



your child. Establish clear family rules about illegal drugs. Most importantly, explain to her what to do if someone offers drugs to her.

## **Race**

The news has always been a public forum for debates about race. Even when the news isn't specifically focused on the topic of race, it can send important messages about different cultures. Kids have a way of picking up on these subtle cues from the media. Kids can get their first glimpses of stereotypes from the news and other media. Is your child seeing that certain races are mostly portrayed as poor, or involved in crime, while others are always experts or professionals? Talk with your kids about race, especially when you see generalizations and stereotypes. Look to balance what your child sees in the news with a dose of reality. If your son says he sees a particular race being arrested on the news all the time, explain to him that even though those particular people may have committed crimes, that doesn't mean their particular race should be associated with crime. The truth is that crimes are committed by people from all ethnic groups but the news tends to report on crimes disproportionately by race.

A good way to start a conversation on race is by talking with your child about what respect means and how to be respectful of all people regardless of race, religion, age or any other characteristic. Make sure your child knows not to limit herself based on what she thinks people feel about her race or background.

## **Accidents/Disasters**

An earthquake in India, plane crash in Tokyo, or hurricane thousands of miles away can seem so close to home when it is reported on the news. Let your child know the facts about these types of disasters. Millions of people got on airplanes today and arrived safely at their destinations. Occasionally people get hurt, even killed, when a plane crashes. Simply because we see these things on the news, doesn't make it any more likely they will happen to us. You may even want to talk with your child about the many people who are working to help those affected by disasters.

Even when the disaster happens closer to home, talk with your child about what she can do to make sure she stays safe. While we may not be able to predict or control these disasters, there are things we can do. If you live in a tornado region or earthquake area, make sure you go over safety procedures as a family. Come up with a plan for what you will do in an emergency.

## **Sickness, Disease and Death**

Stories of Meningitis, Ebola viruses, Ecoli Bacteria, Africanized Killer Bees and HIV are all over the news. Such news of sickness and disease can be very frightening for your child. While the reality is these types of reports focus on very dangerous issues, they probably have very little consequence for your child. Let your child know the realities of these diseases and how to avoid risk factors. This may take additional research, but if you are able to relieve your child's anxiety, it will be worth it.

Because HIV/AIDS is so prominent in our society, it deserves special mention. Research shows that as many as 93% of children have already heard about AIDS by the third grade. Even though they hear about it at school, on the news, or in the media, what they learn is often inaccurate and frightening. Using a news report to initiate a conversation about HIV/AIDS is a great way to find out what your children already know about the disease and gauge how much this topic frightens them.

Above all, make sure your kids understand the facts of how you get AIDS and how you don't. You may need to research this information for yourself. Be prepared to talk about sex when you talk about HIV/AIDS. Don't shy away from conversations about death either.

Conversations with kids about death can be extremely difficult, but they are so important. Helping children understand death may arm them with the skills they need to cope and grieve effectively when someone they love dies. Finding the right words to describe death to a young child can be challenging. Explaining the physical aspects of death can be done by simply saying, "his body was so injured or so full of disease that it quit working. The doctors tried the best they could to fix him, but they just couldn't." Explaining the spiritual side of death depends on your religious beliefs and can be explained to children accordingly.

Children need to be assured that death is not the end -- that love never dies. Just because a person is no longer living, doesn't mean they aren't still loved.

## **Divorce**

Whether it is the latest breakup of a Hollywood couple or reports of skyrocketing statistics, divorce is a common news item. These stories are scary to children, not so much for what they say about the Hollywood couple, but rather what it might mean for mom and dad. With the divorce rate at 50%, it may be difficult to convince your child that he has nothing to fear, but you could alleviate some of his

fears by talking with him and sharing some simple facts. Even though some couples who argue do end up getting a divorce, it doesn't mean that every time mom and dad argue they are thinking about getting divorced. Above all, make sure your kids understand that when two people divorce each other, they aren't divorcing their children. Let your children know that when divorces happen, both parents still love and will continue to care for their kids.

### **Resources -- Good News Sources for Kids**

#### **TV News for Kids**

- Nick News: [www.nick.com](http://www.nick.com)

#### **Online News for Kids**

- The New York Times Learning Network: [www.nytimes.com/learning](http://www.nytimes.com/learning)
- Children's Express: [www.cenews.org](http://www.cenews.org)
- Yahoooligans! News: [www.yahoooligans.com/content/news](http://www.yahoooligans.com/content/news)
- Scholastic News Zone: <http://teacher.scholastic.com/newszone/index.asp>
- Canadian Broadcasting Corporation: [www.cbc4kids.ca](http://www.cbc4kids.ca)
- MSNBC Pencil News for Kids:  
<http://www.msnbc.com/local/pencilnews/default.asp>

#### **Newspapers for Kids**

- Youthline USA: [www.youthline-usa.com](http://www.youthline-usa.com)

#### **News Magazines for Kids**

- Scholastic: [www.scholastic.com](http://www.scholastic.com)
- Time Magazine for Kids: [www.timeforkids.com](http://www.timeforkids.com)
- Sports Illustrated for Kids: [www.sikids.com/index.html](http://www.sikids.com/index.html)